

BIRDSTVILLE

"A Place to be Remembered"

by Frances Gage McGinn

Presented to a Meeting of the Society on 24 April 1980

Birdsville, originally called Diamantina Crossing, is the heart of Heart-Break Corner. It lies 1686 km. (1010 miles) west of Brisbane, and is 12 km. (8 m.) from the South Australian border. This tiny township is in the Parish of Muddawarry, County of Roseberth, Diamantina Shire (98,240 km²) 38,000 square miles. It is in the Gregory electorate of Queensland, latitude 26' south, longitude 139' east.

It is incredibly isolated, being 200 km. (120 m.) from Bedourie, 175 km. (105m.) from Betoota, and 833 km. (500 m.) from Charleville, which is the base for the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Birdsville depends on this base for medical care.

The population has fluctuated greatly over the years. It was never a boom town, but in 1896 it reached its peak. Approximately 200 white people lived there at times, prior to the coming of Federation in 1901. Today, about 20 white people and 50 coloured or part coloured people make up the total population.

It was the Customs Outpost prior to Federation, in 1901. All goods to and from South Australia had to be checked. The smuggling of whisky and cigars, as one official put it, was "something frightful".

One hundred years have elapsed since the first shanty shop was built at Diamantina Crossing, by Matthew Flynn, who was an itinerant source of supply of goods to the earliest settlers.

In 1880, Surveyor Poeppel surveyed the border between Queensland and South Australia from Haddon's Corner to Poeppel's Corner. The famous peg is 150 km. (90 m.) west of Birdsville. The peg, now in Adelaide, was a coolibah log dragged 100 km (60 m.) from the Mulligan Flats, across salt pans and sand hills and adzed on the site and carved deeply, "Queensland" "Northern Territory" "South Australia". It was 2m. (7 ft.) high and 2.50 mm (10 inches) in diameter. Set up at latitude 26' longitude 139'.

Mrs. McGinn, a native of Bundaberg (Q.) now living in Brisbane, has spent years researching the history of Birdsville and observing at first hand the way of life in that part of the Australian interior. Her book on the town has been published in its original form with the help of private backing.



Court House, Birdsville (1894). "Police Station", Customs House (left). Customs Officer E. Ward and son Ted playing cricket. Mr. E. Ward died of heat stroke in 1897. His son Ted lost his life in World War I. The widow of Mr. Philp (in black, aged 26), a sister of Mrs. E. Ward, later was re-married to Mr. A. A. P. Shakespeare. (Photo loaned by her daughter, Eva)

Captain Charles Sturt was the first white man to come into the area in 1845. A monument stands in the main street of Birdsville in his honour. It was erected in 1944, 99 years later. Mr. G. H. Devries M.L.A., unveiled the cairn and was the first politician to visit Birdsville. Sturt's discoveries opened up the way for pastoral occupation in Western Queensland.

The tragic Burke and Wills expedition of 1860 is national history. Four of the original party – Burke, Wills, King and Gray – camped near the Diamantina River and that camp site is marked by a scarfed tree lettered B&W. C76. 1860.

Coming of the Settlers

Within 15 years many settlers had arrived. J. W. Keyes settled on Roseberth in 1873, Patrick Wrinnan on Annadale Station on the Mulligan in 1876. In December 1881 Frederick George Smith applied for a lease of Adria Downs. Today it belongs to Mr. W. F. Brook and D. and N. Brook of Brooklands, Birdsville. Duncan McGregor was on Glingyle in 1876, and Sylvester Brown on Sandringham about that time. Carcoory Station 83 km. (50 m.) north of Birdsville (now part of Roseberth) was

established by H. N. Wilson in 1877. Many changes of ownership followed initial settlement and huge areas were later incorporated into the Kidman cattle empire.



Aerial photograph taken by W. J. Cunneen in 1973, showing Birdsville air strip and cooling ponds (top right) and billabong (lower left). Main street is the end of the Birdsville Track.

Surveyor F. A. Hartwell surveyed the town of Birdsville in 1885. And it has been known as Birdsville officially ever since. How the name originated is not clear, as several versions are given as authentic. But the most logical one, which is accepted, is that it was called Burtsville after Mr. Burt who purchased the depot from Mr. Flynn and set up a store there 100 years ago. A.E.P. Burt declined the honour accorded him and suggested Birdsville. As millions of birds make their home at the Billa-bong along the river, this name is most suitable. They did name a street after Burt. It runs past the site of his shop. Today two cairns stand where it once stood. They commemorate the crossings of the Simpson Desert by E. Colson in 1936, and Dr. Madigan in 1939. The main street is named Adelaide Street and the town is neatly laid out in squares, three running east to west and four north to south.

Building material was hard to procure, and transport by camels, horses and bullocks up the Birdsville Track slow and costly. The main building material was stone hewn 26 km. (16 m.) east of Birdsville and cemented with lime found close to the quarry. Four of the original buildings still stand: that is, in part.

The first council meeting was called on 2 March 1886, and six men were elected to the council. Birdsville Hotel was the site used for this occasion. Later the Divisional Board Hall was built of hewn stone in Adelaide Street, opposite the site of the present hospital. Birdsville continued to conduct the Council business until 1951, when the "seat of power" was removed to Bedourie, 200 km. (120 m.) north of Birdsville. On 28 February 1887 a request was made to the local Member for postal and wire connection from Birdsville to Brisbane. This request became reality on 16 August 1976, (89 years later). Rates were struck at four pence in the pound on valuation. Most of the original business was conducted in Adelaide, and the Commercial Bank in Adelaide handled the financial side.



Original Birdsville Hotel in early 1920's. Section on the right collapsed in 1964. Room on the left used as a store. This famous historical hotel is now being rebuilt following a fire in 1979, the original frontage being preserved.

(Photo loaned by Sister Mercer)

Originally there were no blacks locally, but by the mid-1880's they had converged in the area around the town water hole, causing problems for the council in trying to conserve the supply and keep it reasonably clean for human consumption. But not only the blacks were causing trouble in that department – a horse died in it, and the council considered the charge by Mr. Scott for dragging it out to be exorbitant.

They asked him to re-consider the charge, and they put up a notice for the blacks to keep away from the hole, but that was torn up.

Stones were another problem, and tenders were called for the removal of all gibbers of two inches and more from the main street. About this period the rabbits arrived in the area and the building of the Rabbit Fence was considered urgent. Huts were built every 50 miles apart, and the boundary riders patrolled the fence 25 miles each side of their hut. The fence was completed in the mid-1890's and fell into disuse in the early 1930's

Saved from Starvation

How the settlers coped with odds in this remote and desolate area remains a mystery: Along with the blacks, dogs, stones, dust, heat, flies and dead horses, the camels were a problem. They were banned from the town from noon and not allowed to camp at the town water hole. The penalty was a fine of five pounds.

Extremely uncertain supply lines for food and necessities were a major problem. The great drought of 1898 to 1904 almost wiped out the population. Only goats survived to be slaughtered for meat and to produce a little milk. These were fed on coolibah leaves. The coming of the camel train saved the situation. Mrs. Alice Whitrod remembers well the sound of the camel bells tingling as they made their way along the end of the Birdsville Track bringing food for those near starving. Mrs. Whitrod was born there on 23 September 1890 and attended the first school opened in 1899. Alice is the mother of Mr. Ray Whitrod, former Commissioner of Police in Queensland. She lives in Adelaide, and in her 90th Year remembers well the early days of Birdsville. My book, "Birdsville" is dedicated to Alice Whitrod.

The first school teacher, Marie Louise Perry, arrived to open the school in the Divisional Board Hall in 1899. She stayed only a few weeks. Since that time no woman has been appointed to teach in this lonely town. Only single men are sent out by the Education Department for one-year terms. They may request to stay for two years. There have been periods when there was no school open. Occasionally an itinerant teacher came (by horse) to try to teach those in need of education. Many of the first boys to attend school in Birdsville paid the supreme sacrifice in World War I.

Today there is a well-established school providing modern teaching for approximately 24 children. Medical aid was sadly lacking, and until the Rev. John Flynn did something constructive about it in the 1920's the locals had to depend on the policeman's medical book and the midwife. In 1923 the Royal Hotel was converted to a hospital. Sisters Grace Francis and Boyd arrived on 23 September to open it and called it

Brisbane Home. The Australian Inland Mission has maintained unbroken service there ever since. The advent of pedal wireless, invented by Trager, and the Flying Doctor Service have provided urgently needed help since 1929. Today modern equipment is installed and the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Charleville, is on call at all times.

The rain fall at Birdsville is very sparse – only 125 mm (5 inches) a year is the normal rain fall. But half an inch (12 mm) could put the airport out of action. Today an all-weather strip is due for completion.

The first planes to land at the town were two Royal Air Force Wapiti planes in August 1929. They landed on a claypan south of the township. Now about 900 planes a year use the strip in Birdsville.

The Famous “Track”

The Birdsville Track is known far and wide. This long stretch of so-called road – 508 km. (305 m.) – runs from Marree in South Australia to Birdsville. For years great mobs of cattle converged at Birdsville for their trek down the track. This could well be recorded as one of the greatest feats accomplished by drovers, to take thousands of head of cattle down that road to Marree to be entrained to the Adelaide markets. Today road trains do the trip in a few hours where once it took weeks. The famous old Condamine horse bells are silent now, and Scobies whips lie rotting behind shed doors. But the old timers still dream of them around their camp fires of Gidgee coals.

Shell's film “Back O'Beyond” portrays the mail run on the Birdsville Track in the early 1950's. Tom Kruse was awarded the M.B.E. by the Queen after she saw this film. Tom's comment was typical: “What! Just for doing my job!”

Water was always a problem. With the low rainfall and high evaporation of 600 mm (100 inches) a year, it was difficult to conserve water. In 1961 the bore was put down to 4200 ft. (1280 m) and produces 3.4 million litres (750,000 gallons) per day. This ensures plenty of water for the town. The bore until recently was used to generate power. Now the extra power needed for the town is provided by diesel engine.

Many local personalities have come and gone. On 16 February 1980 Maudie (Okawillika), last of the Georgina tribe, passed away. Reported to be over 100 years old, she saw the passing of the stone age and the coming of the jet. Honour and recognition have come to a few. Sister Grace Francis was awarded the M.B.E. for her nursing service there. Mr. W. F. Brook was awarded the M.B.E., and Mr. Tom Kruse, the Birdsville mail man in the 1950's received the M.B.E. also, as we have noted.

In June 1979 fire destroyed the main part of the Birdsville Hotel. Fear of this historical land-mark being demolished has been a source of concern for those who know and love Birdsville. It is being rebuilt, and one

can only hope that some of its original features will be retained for posterity. The police station is to be converted to a Museum and a new police house built. The old corrugated iron hall is to be replaced. Only four of the original stone buildings in the town remain in part. The remains of the old Royal Hotel were allowed to disintegrate through neglect and vandalism. It should have been preserved as a memorial to the early settlers and the nurses who cared for them. These settlers established a way of life far from the city comforts and amenities.



Birdsville store in 1926. Still in use today, with extensions, and painted yellow. Owned by F. W. D. & N. Brook.
(Photo loaned by Sister Mercer)

Birdsville will remain a place to be remembered. "It is not to be forgotten or mixed up in the mind with other places."

NOTES

Pugh's Almanac records the following details of Birdsville in the 1890's:-

Population: 100 Whites
8 Chinese
(District total 700)

Business mainly done in Adelaide, stores, etc being brought mostly by camels, horses and bullocks.

Police Magistrate: Edward Ward.

Clerk of Petty Sessions: Arthur McDonald.

Clubs: Australian Turf Club
Cricket Club
Birdsville Jockey Club.

Customs Officer: Edward Ward.
H. St. John Wyatt

Marsupial Board: Chairman - W. H. Wyatt
Hon. Sec. - A. W. Hood

Police: Sgt. Arthur McDonald, 1 Constable, 2 Black trackers,
2 Snr. Constables stationed at Bedourie, 90 miles from Birdsville.